MARVEL COMICS
DEC
#1
HEROES REBORN
THE RETURN
PART 1 OF 4
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LARROCA
THIBERT
THE COUNTDOWN BEGINS...
AS WORLDS COLLIDE!
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HEROES REBORN

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THE RETURN PART 1 OF 4

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WHAT HAS COME BEFORE...

ONSLAUGHT

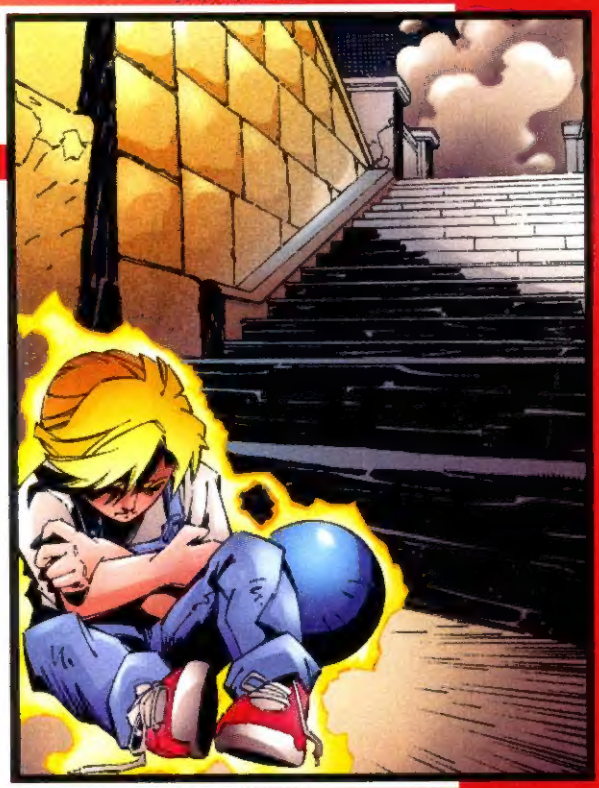
A year ago, in one of the most monumental and tragic battles in history, the villain known as Onslaught fought nearly every hero in the Marvel Universe. Onslaught was a being composed of the combined energy of the mutant Magneto's evil psyche and Professor Xavier's own repressed anger. Eventually, the Onslaught persona grew powerful enough to exist as a separate entity. In an attempt to further amplify his own power, he absorbed Franklin Richards and Nate Grey (X-Man), arguably the two most powerful mutants in the world. He did all this with no regard for the destruction he was causing to much of the New York City area.

MARVEL UNIVERSE

Onslaught's power continued to increase until, in a last-ditch effort, the non-mutant heroes, including all of the members of the Fantastic Four and the Avengers, and even one archenemy, hurled themselves into Onslaught, with the hope that they would be able to disrupt the fabric of his very being. The Heroes' gambit paid off, but not without a terrible cost--all those who had jumped into Onslaught seemingly perished as the rest of the world watched! But all was not as it seemed. In fact, the Heroes were anything but dead, as they were actually whisked away to another universe!

FANTASTIC FOUR

It was young Franklin Richards, son of Reed and Sue Richards of the FF, who was unwittingly responsible for the disappearance of the Heroes. Franklin's amazing powers were obviously even more far-reaching than anyone had imagined, as he was unintentionally able to create a pocket universe in which the Heroes now exist, the portal for which he carries with him--a little blue ball. Although his timely intervention saved the Heroes, it unfortunately also led to his being left alone without his loved ones, and likewise the world was left without its greatest heroes.



HEROES REBORN

For the last year, immediately following the defeat of Onslaught, the Heroes have been leading new lives which were, to the best of their knowledge, a continuation of their normal lives. They were not aware of their previous existence back in the real Marvel Universe. In the pocket universe the Heroes had radically different origins and vaguely resembled their former selves. For example, Iron Man, previously a teen, was now an adult; Captain America was never found in a block of ice by the Avengers-- instead he helped to form the group which was now sanctioned by S.H.I.E.L.D.; and instead of the FF's gaining their powers while exploring space, they were bombarded by cosmic rays from a nuclear explosion involving the Silver Surfer.

Now, a year later, even more is at stake, and this time the combined might of all the Heroes may not be enough to weather the coming storm ...

THE PLAYERS

THE AVENGERS

The world's mightiest heroes: the super-soldier Captain America; the thunder god Thor; the armor-clad Iron Man; the probability-altering mutant, the Scarlet Witch; the master archer Hawkeye; and the shrinking super hero, Ant-Man. Gathered together to combat the menaces no one hero could take on, they have proven that there is indeed strength in numbers.

FANTASTIC FOUR

When Reed Richards set out to investigate an astral anomaly, he was joined by his fiancee Sue Storm, her brother Johnny Storm, and test pilot Ben Grimm. Unfortunately the four were caught in a nuclear explosion and consequently bombarded with cosmic radiation. They discovered that exposure to the cosmic rays had left them radically altered—and with amazing abilities. Vowing to use their newfound powers for good, Mister Fantastic, the Invisible Woman, the Human Torch, and the Thing banded together to form—the Fantastic Four!

CAPTAIN AMERICA

On the brink of World War II, Steve Rogers, a frail young man, volunteered to participate in an experimental program called Operation: Super Soldier. As a result, he found himself transformed into a human powerhouse. Armed with his indestructible shield and a costume fashioned after the American flag, he served his country both at home and overseas. When Rogers disagreed with President Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb, he was deemed a threat. To eliminate him, he was brainwashed and has since been leading a false life—at least until Nick Fury, head of S.H.I.E.L.D., had no choice but to reactivate Captain America to combat the villainous Red Skull. Today Cap also acts as leader of the Avengers.

IRON MAN

A near-fatal accident left Tony Stark, the brilliant and wealthy inventor, with no other option but to wear a life-preserving suit of armor. His brush with death forced Tony to reevaluate the way he was leading his life. Thus he decided to use his armor to make a positive difference as the invincible Iron Man!

CELESTIALS

The Celestials are a star-faring race of gods who possess untold cosmic power. Standing two thousand feet tall, the Celestials are clad in full body armor. No Earth being has ever seen what they look like beneath their armor or knows their origin. The Celestials have in the past visited Earth a handful of times, and are responsible for experiments that resulted in the creation of the Eternals, the Deviants and also the Skrulls. Ashema, the human personification of a Celestial, has come to Earth to learn from the newest god, Franklin Richards. Now they are hell-bent on destroying one of Franklin's two universes. The question is—which one?

BRUCE BANNER / THE HULK

In the real Marvel Universe, Bruce Banner, a meek scientist, became the Hulk, a monstrous power-house, when he was caught in the blast of a gamma bomb he himself invented. During last year's battle with Onslaught he was split permanently into his two separate entities. Banner, along with the other Heroes, dove into Onslaught to defeat him. Once in the new pocket universe, Banner developed a new Hulk persona. Meanwhile, the Hulk that was left behind has begun to die due to his separation from Banner. Their split has also caused the universes to sever even further, and now time in which to reunite them is running out.

FRANKLIN RICHARDS

The son of Reed and Sue Richards (Mister Fantastic and the Invisible Woman of the real Marvel Universe), Franklin has always been regarded as having great mutant abilities, yet no one was aware that those powers were so far-reaching. In a spectacular display of power that extended to the far reaches of the universe, he created the *pocket* universe the Heroes went to. And now the Celestials are coming to learn from this new and powerful young god.

THE BEGINNING OF A TYPICALLY ATYPICAL DAY AT THE BAXTER BUILDING, HEADQUARTERS OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR IN NEW YORK CITY...
I HATE YOU, REED RICHARDS.
Hmmm?
YOU HAVE NO BUSINESS LOOKING THAT "TOGETHER" FIRST THING IN THE MORNING.
SUSAN! ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?
SURE. YAWN LOUSY DREAMS, THAT'S ALL. AND MY MOUTH TASTES LIKE TOXIC WASTE.
MAYBE I SHOULD GO BACK TO BED...
IF THAT'S WHAT YOU PREFER, BY ALL MEANS. BUT YOU'RE GOING TO MISS A BEAUTIFUL DAY!
MORNING PEOPLE. SHEESH.
NOT A CLOUD IN THE SKY. THE KIND OF WEATHER THAT MAKES YOU GLAD TO BE ALIVE.

STAN LEE PRESENTS:

HEROES REBORN
THE RETURN PART 1 of 2

IN ANOTHER NEW YORK, NEAR A FORMER HEADQUARTERS OF OUR JUST MENTIONED HEROES...

I WANT MY MOMMY AND DADDY!

THE JUDGMENT

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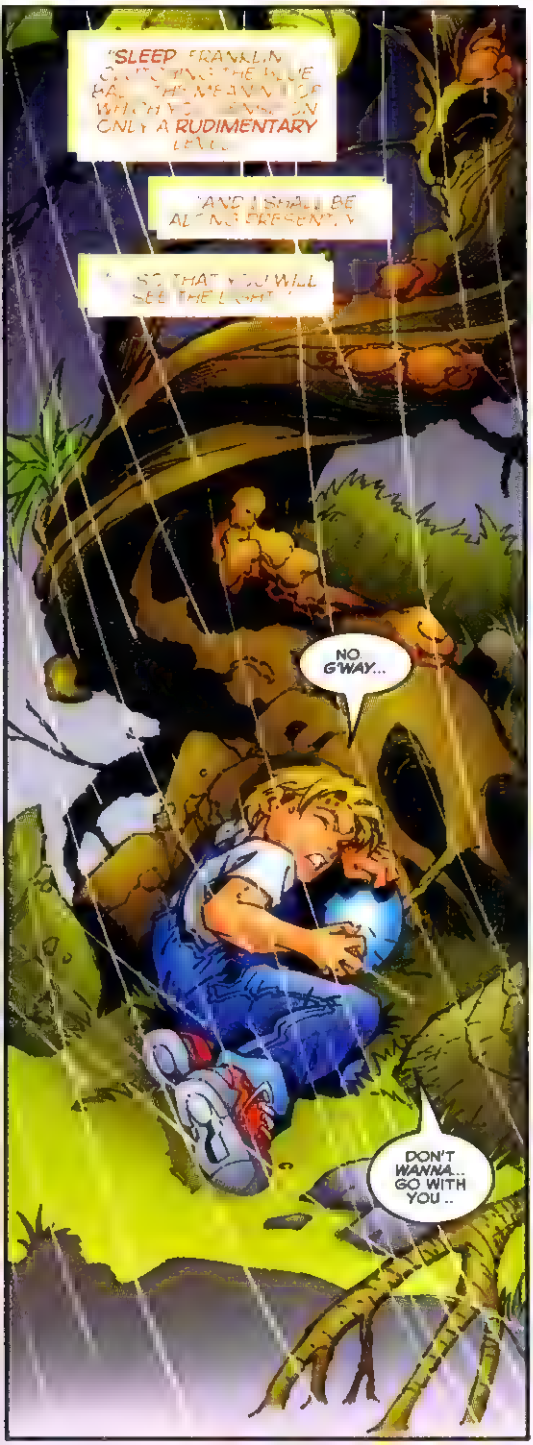
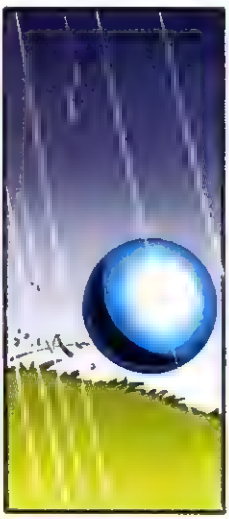
YOU DO NOT NEED REED AND SUSAN RICHARDS.
YES! YES, I DO! I WANT THEM AND I WANNA BE WITH THEM!
UNNECESSARY. YOU WILL BE WITH US.
BUT WE KNOW IT IS YET DIFFICULT FOR YOU TO COMPREHEND. SO WE ARE MAKING CONTACT WITH YOU IN A WAY YOU WILL UNDERSTAND.
BUT I DON'T UNNERSTAND! I DON'T UNNERSTAND ANY OF THIS!
DO NOT WORRY. YOU WILL.
NO! GET AWAY FROM ME! I'M NOT S'POSED TO TALK TO STRANGERS!
GET AWAY RIGHT N--
WHOAAAAA!

YOU HAVE POWERS YOU DO NOT FULLY UNDERSTAND YET, FRANKLIN RICHARDS. POWERS TO SHAPE REALITY.
POWERS UNPRECEDENTED IN YOUR RACE'S HISTORY.
BUT WITH THAT POWER COME HARD CHOICES.
IT IS TIME FOR YOU TO REALIZE THAT YOUR PARENTS ARE ELSEWHERE AND ELSEWHEN... BUT YOU CAN REACH THEM.
YOU PUT THEM THERE. YOU SHUNTED THEM INTO ANOTHER WORLD.
AND YOU CAN BRING THEM BACK TO A WORLD, IF YOU SO DESIRE. BUT YOU WILL HAVE TO DECIDE WHAT SORT OF WORLD IT WILL BE.
IT WILL BE A DECISION... OF COSMIC PROPORTIONS.

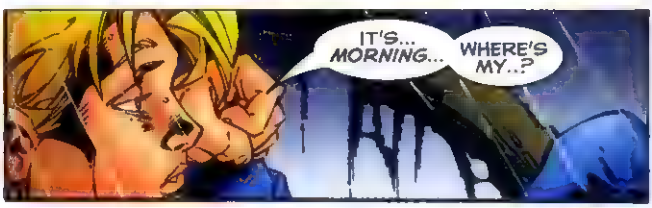
"FOR NOW, HOWEVER... RETURN TO YOUR PRESENT ABODE RETURN TO THE SWAMP IN FLORIDA.
THE MAN-THING
"BUT DO NOT FORGET THIS DREAM.

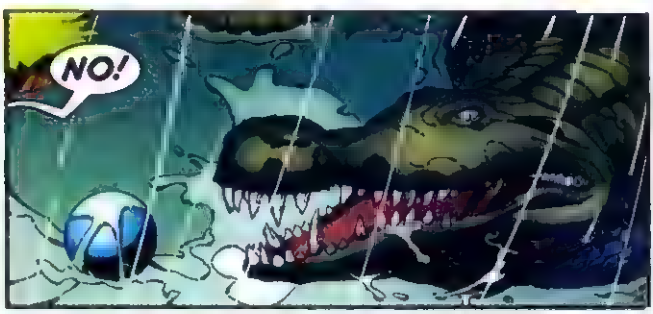

"SLEEP
ONLY A RUDIMENTARY
"AND I SHALL BE
NO G'WAY...
DON'T WANNA... GO WITH YOU..

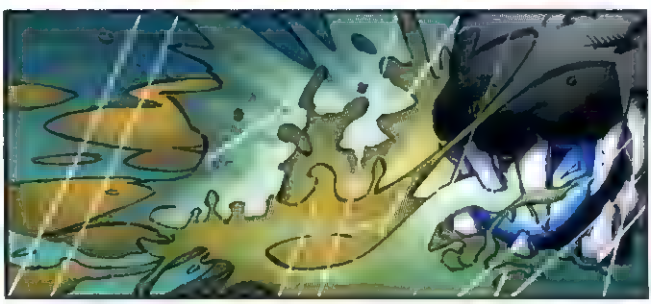
...SEE ANY... STUPID LIGHT..

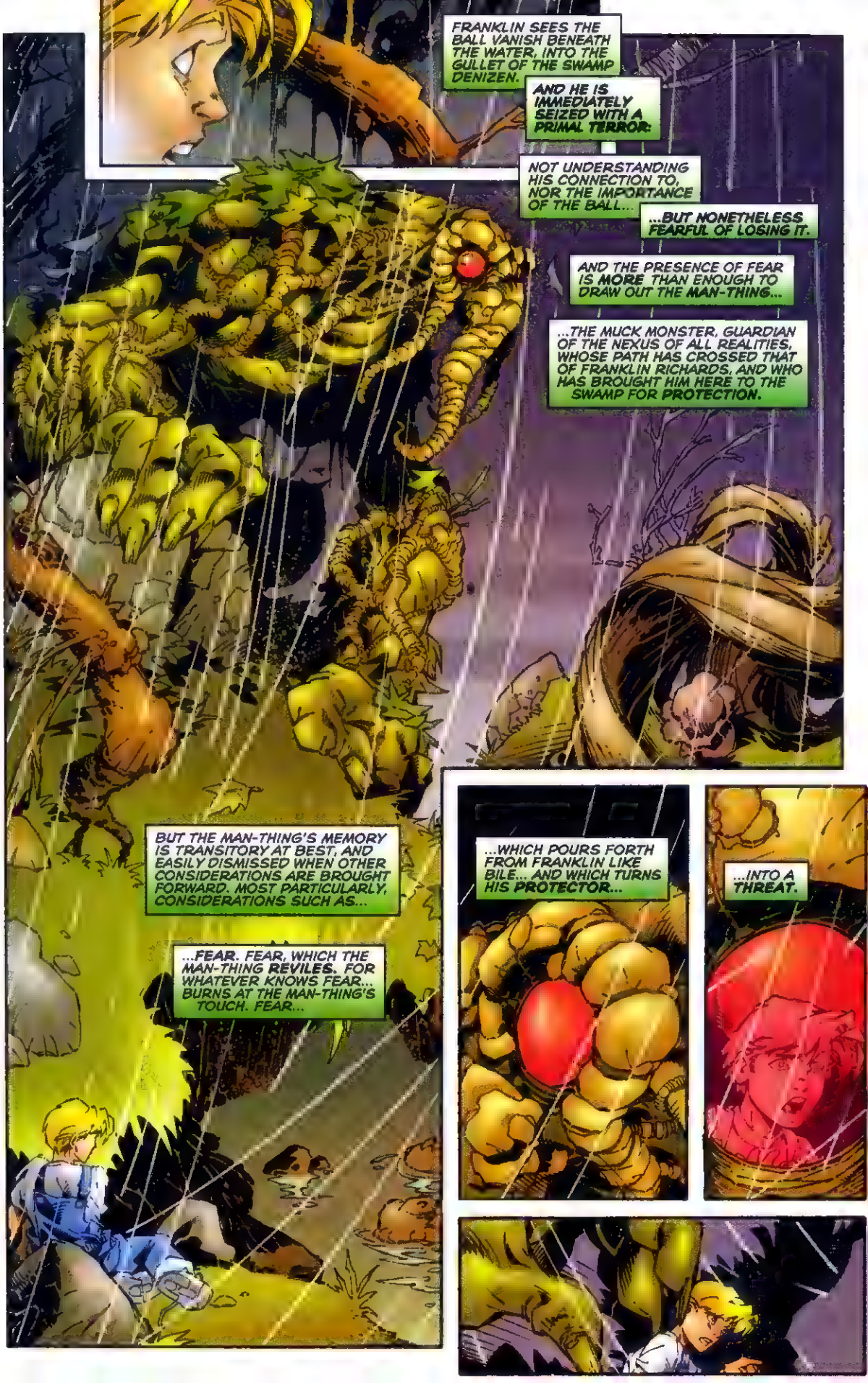


LIGHT?


IT'S... MORNING...
WHERE'S MY..?


NO!

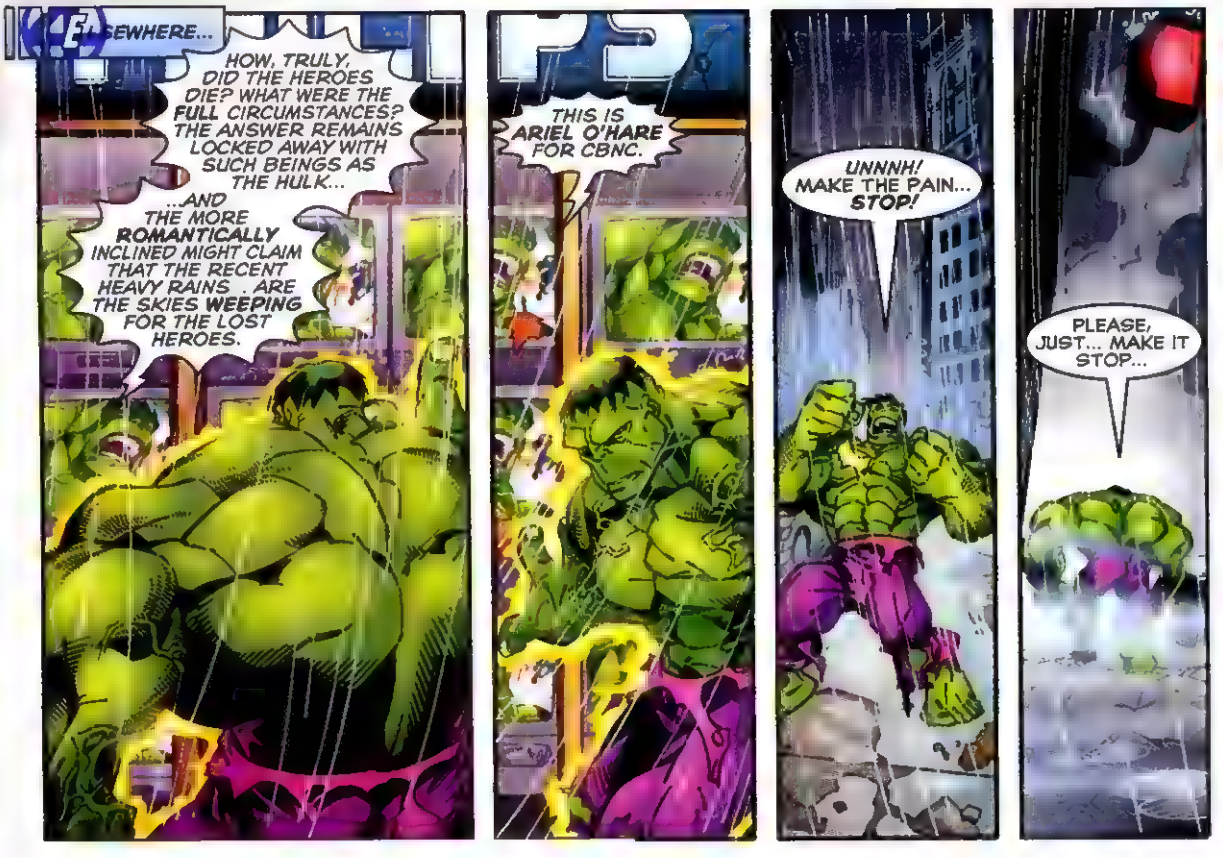



FRANKLIN SEES THE BALL VANISH BENEATH THE WATER, INTO THE GULLET OF THE SWAMP DENIZEN.
AND HE IS IMMEDIATELY SEIZED WITH A PRIMAL TERROR:
NOT UNDERSTANDING HIS CONNECTION TO, NOR THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BALL...
...BUT NONETHELESS FEARFUL OF LOSING IT.
AND THE PRESENCE OF FEAR IS MORE THAN ENOUGH TO DRAW OUT THE MAN-THING...
...THE MUCK MONSTER, GUARDIAN OF THE NEXUS OF ALL REALITIES, WHOSE PATH HAS CROSSED THAT OF FRANKLIN RICHARDS, AND WHO HAS BROUGHT HIM HERE TO THE SWAMP FOR PROTECTION.
BUT THE MAN-THING'S MEMORY IS TRANSITORY AT BEST, AND EASILY DISMISSED WHEN OTHER CONSIDERATIONS ARE BROUGHT FORWARD. MOST PARTICULARLY, CONSIDERATIONS SUCH AS...
...FEAR. FEAR, WHICH THE MAN-THING REVILES. FOR WHATEVER KNOWS FEAR... BURNS AT THE MAN-THING'S TOUCH. FEAR...
...WHICH POURS FORTH FROM FRANKLIN LIKE BILE... AND WHICH TURNS HIS PROTECTOR...
...INTO A THREAT.

QUEENS, NEW YORK ..
HEY, AUNT ANNA... MIND PUTTING ON THE WEATHER CHANNEL?
SEE IF THERE'S ANY HINT AS TO WHEN THIS DOWN-POUR'S GOING TO LET UP?
I'D JUST LIKE TO FINISH WATCHING THIS REPORT ON CNN, PETER...
Oh, SURE. WHAT'S IT ABOUT?
WELL, IT'S ABOUT ALL THOSE POOR HEROES. IT'S THE ANNIVERSARY OF THEIR...
...THEIR DEATHS, YOU KNOW.
YEAH. I KNOW.
ONCE, WE LOOKED TO THE SKIES AND TOOK COMFORT IN THEIR PRESENCE, KNOWING THAT THE BEINGS DUBBED "SUPER HEROES" WERE THERE TO RISK THEIR LIVES FOR US.
BUT HERE, AT FOUR FREEDOMS PLAZA, THE LIGHTS ARE DARK. THE HOPE IS DIMINISHED.

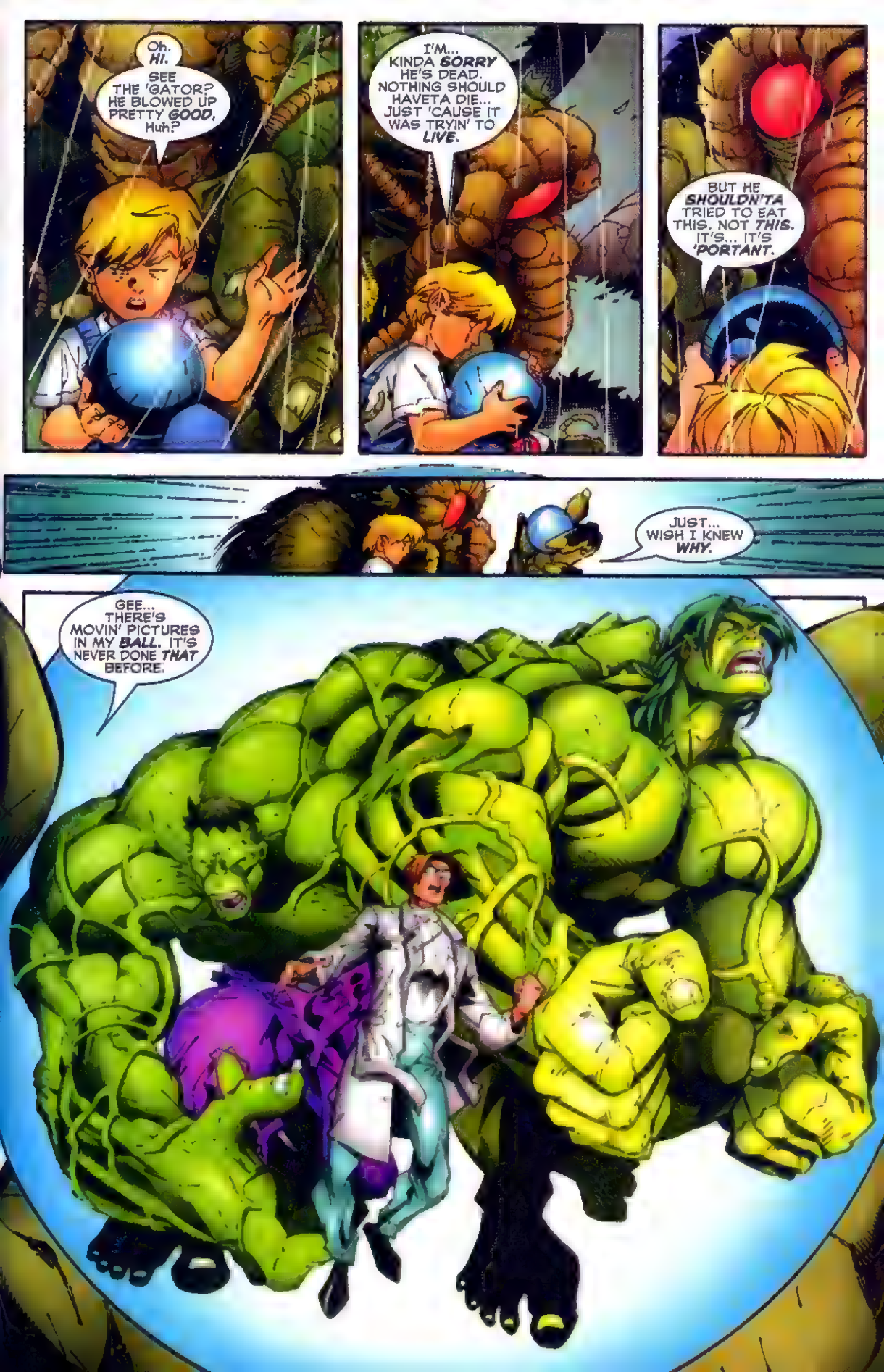
"AFTER ALL THIS TIME, THE DETAILS BEHIND THEIR DISAPPEARANCE REMAIN SKETCHY; IT IS BELIEVED, HOWEVER, THAT IN A BATTLE WITH A BEING NAMED 'ONSLAUGHT', MANY HEROES LAID DOWN THEIR LIVES TO STOP HIM.
"HEROES INCLUDING CAPTAIN AMERICA, THOR, THE AVENGERS, AND THE FORMER RESIDENTS OF FOUR FREEDOMS PLAZA, THE FANTASTIC FOUR.
"THE FEW SUPER-POWERED BEINGS REMAINING, INCLUDING THE ELUSIVE X-MEN, HAVE NOT MADE THEMSELVES AVAILABLE FOR QUESTIONING BY AUTHORITIES."
TERRIBLE. TERRIBLE. MAKES YOU WONDER WHY ANYONE WOULD PUT ON A COSTUME AND FIGHT CRIME AGAIN.
YEAH. SURE DOES.

"BUT NATURE ABHORS A VACUUM, AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE HEROES HAS BROUGHT FORTH NEW DEFENDERS, SUCH AS THE THUNDERBOLTS...
"...AN AMBITIOUS GROUP WHO, IN THEIR EARLIEST PUBLICIZED CASE, TACKLED THE MOST POWERFUL SURVIVOR OF THE ONSLAUGHT DEBACLE... THE INCREDIBLE HULK."


ELSEWHERE...
HOW, TRULY, DID THE HEROES DIE? WHAT WERE THE FULL CIRCUMSTANCES? THE ANSWER REMAINS LOCKED AWAY WITH SUCH BEINGS AS THE HULK...
...AND THE MORE ROMANTICALLY INCLINED MIGHT CLAIM THAT THE RECENT HEAVY RAINS . ARE THE SKIES WEEPING FOR THE LOST HEROES.
THIS IS ARIEL O'HARE FOR CBNC.
UNNNH! MAKE THE PAIN... STOP!
PLEASE, JUST... MAKE IT STOP...

OBSERVATION LOG OF PROFESSOR WARREN ROTHSCHILD, DAY 147. RECORDING.
IT'S BEEN A WEEK SINCE I HAD A TRULY GOOD NIGHT FOR OBSERVATION. IF THIS KEEPS UP...
...I MAY CHANGE MY VOCATION FROM ASTRONOMER TO ARK BUILDER...
Eh? NOW THAT'S IMPRESSIVE/ WHATEVER IT IS, I WISH I COULD SEE IT CLOSER!
WAIT, IT'S... IT IS GETTING CLOSER. WHAT THE DEVIL IS --?
EEYAARGH!

NO! NOT THAT, TOO! I WANT IT BACK!
GIVE IT BACK --/
-- NOW!
THE MAN-THING HESITATES... FOR THE FEAR IS DISSIPATING...
...WASHED AWAY BY ANGER.
BUT THEN, THE FORCE OF THE BLUE BALL GENERATES TRANSFORMATIONS ALL ITS OWN.
AS ANGER BECOMES WONDER...
...WONDER BECOMES RAPTURE...
...AND PREDATOR... BECOMES LUGGAGE.
I KNEW I'D GET YOU BACK. I KNEW IT.


Oh. HI.
SEE THE 'GATOR? HE BLOWED UP PRETTY GOOD, Huh?
I'M... KINDA SORRY HE'S DEAD. NOTHING SHOULD HAVETA DIE... JUST 'CAUSE IT WAS TRYIN' TO LIVE.
BUT HE SHOULDN'TA TRIED TO EAT THIS. NOT THIS. IT'S... IT'S 'PORTANT.
JUST... WISH I KNEW WHY.
GEE... THERE'S MOVIN' PICTURES IN MY BALL. IT'S NEVER DONE THAT BEFORE.

AND IN THE OTHER WORLD...
AND THE LORD SPOKE UNTO NOAH AND TOLD HIM HE WAS GOING TO DESTROY THE EARTH! AND NOAH OFFERED NO ARGUMENTS, BUT SIMPLY ACCEPTED THE LORD'S WORD AND SAVED HIMSELF!
AND SOME SCHOLARS FEEL NOAH WAS LESS THAN PIOUS, BECAUSE HE SHOULD HAVE TRIED TO ARGUE WITH GOD, OR TO SAVE HIS FELLOW MAN!
FOR AS JACOB WRESTLED WITH AN ANGEL, SO IT IS THE DESTINY OF MANKIND TO STRUGGLE WITH THE DIVINE...
MINE HEAD BE THROBBING AT THIS BATTLE, BUT THOR SHALL NOT CEASE UNTIL THE HULK CRIES, "HOLD, ENOW!"
THE THING AIN'T GIVING UP NEITHER, WINGHEAD... BECAUSE IT'S CLOBBERIN' TIME!
CHOOOM

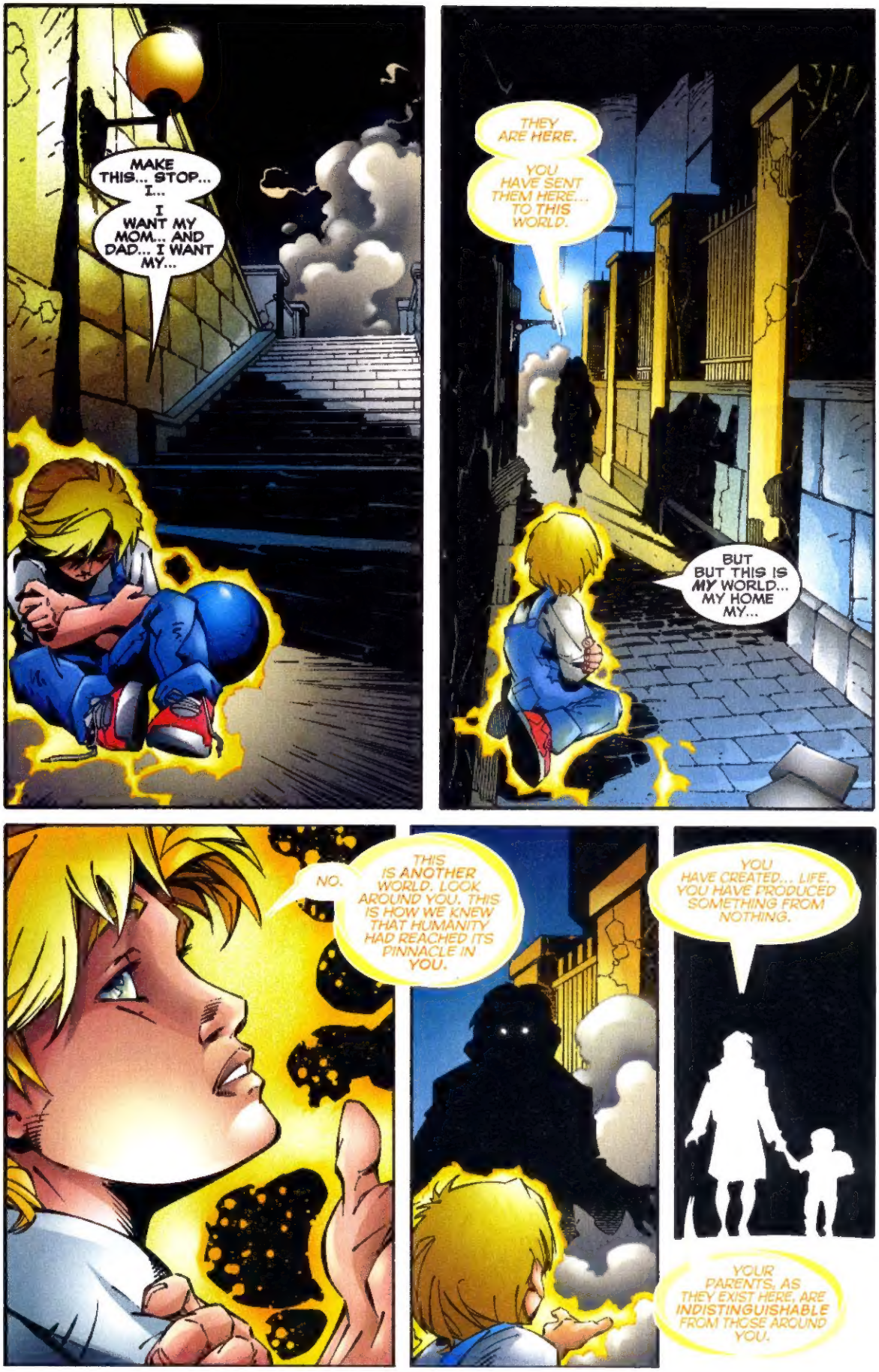
UNCA... UNCA BENP!
POSSIBLE.

LOOK INTO MY EYES, CREATURE.
AND KNOW ME.
AND UPON KNOWING ME... KNOW .
... FEAR
FWOOOSH
WH -- WHAT DID YOU DO TO HIM?
ITSELF.

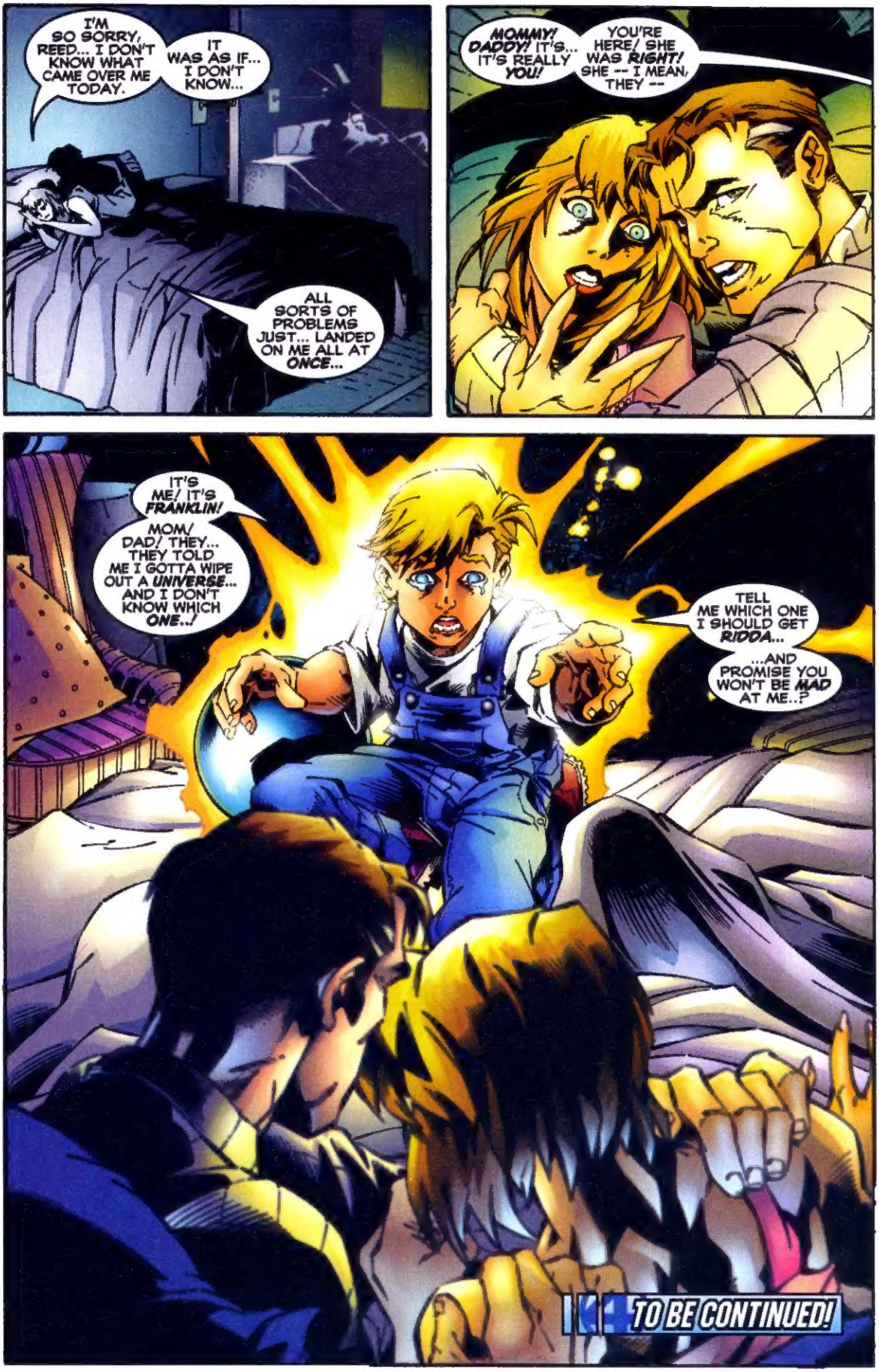
NEAR THE END OF A TYPICALLY ATYPICAL DAY FOR THE FANTASTIC FOUR...
AND THE GREEN-SKINNED CREEP GOT AWAY!
I'M... SURE IT WASN'T YOUR FAULT, BEN.
YEAH, IT WAS, SUZIE-Q. I WASN'T AT THE TOP OF MY GAME. IT WAS LIKE...
...LIKE SOMETHIN' WAS RATTLIN' AROUND IN MY HEAD. DISTRACTIN' ME.
I'M SURE YOU'LL SUCCEED NEXT TIME, BEN. I'M QUITE SURE.
HMMF. THIS TEA IS ICE-COLD.
ALLOW ME, REED.
THANK YOU, JOHNN--
SUSAN? SUE, WHAT'S WR--
I }SOB{ I DON'T KNOW! ALL DAY, I'VE BEEN...
...I'M CRYING... AND I... I DON'T KNOW WHY! I --
I THINK SOMETHING'S HAPPENING...

HE'S NOT A "IT," HE'S A "HE," AND YOU BRING HIM BACK!
HE'S ALIVE! THAT MAKES HIM 'PORTANT, IS WHAT MY MOMMY ALWAYS SAID!
I'LL SHOUT IF I WANNA SH--
LOWER YOUR VOICE
IS THIS BETTER?
YES
Uh... WELL, HE SAYS SUMFIN' LIKE "I DID IT," AND THEN UNCA BEN MAKES FUN OF HIM...
...AND SOMETIMES STUFF BLOWS UP...

...AND THEN HE... CLEANS UP, I GUESS.
EXACTLY.
FRANKLIN... I AM PART OF A GREAT RACE OF BEINGS CALLED THE CELESTIALS. OUR TRUE FORMS WOULD LIKELY FRIGHTEN YOU, SO I HAVE CHOSEN THIS ONE.
WE CONDUCT EXPERIMENTS, TOO. AND ONE OF THEM WAS ON THIS WORLD, AS LIFE DEVELOPED.
BUT WE HAVE ACCOMPLISHED ALL WE SET OUT TO DO.
LIKE... LIKE WHAT?
TO MAKE YOU, FRANKLIN, OR SOMEONE LIKE YOU.
AND NOW IT'S TIME TO WIPE OFF THE PETRI DISH. TAKE THE EXPERIMENT'S RESULT AND CLEAN UP EVERYTHING ELSE.
YOU'RE... YOU'RE GONNA CLEAN OFF... EARTH?!
BUT... YOU CAN'T! I DON'T WANT YOU TO! IF YOU DO, I'LL...
YOU WILL DO AS YOU DID BEFORE.
YOU MUST SEE YOUR HANDIWORK... TO UNDERSTAND WHAT LIES BEFORE YOU.
HEEYYYYYY


MAKE THIS... STOP... I...
I WANT MY MOM... AND DAD... I WANT MY...
THEY ARE HERE.
YOU HAVE SENT THEM HERE... TO THIS WORLD.
BUT BUT THIS IS MY WORLD... MY HOME MY...
NO.
THIS IS ANOTHER WORLD. LOOK AROUND YOU. THIS IS HOW WE KNEW THAT HUMANITY HAD REACHED ITS PINNACLE IN YOU.
YOU HAVE CREATED... LIFE. YOU HAVE PRODUCED SOMETHING FROM NOTHING.
YOUR PARENTS, AS THEY EXIST HERE, ARE INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM THOSE AROUND YOU.

YOU HAVE CREATED GREATNESS IN THIS, YOUR OWN UNIVERSE, FRANKLIN.
YOU ARE, TO ALL INTENTS AND PURPOSES, GOD OF THIS UNIVERSE. BUT FOR YOU TO LEARN AND GROW -- TO UNDERSTAND YOUR OBLIGATIONS -- A SACRIFICE MUST BE MADE.
IF YOU DO NOT DESIRE THAT WE WIPE AWAY THE NO-LONGER NECESSARY EARTH... THEN YOU MUST OBLITERATE THIS WHICH YOU YOURSELF HAVE CREATED.
BUT IT'S... IT'S FULLA REAL PEOPLE! YOU SAID SO!
IF I 'CLEAN IT UP'... THEN WON'T THEY BE DEAD?
IT'D BE LIKE... LIKE I KILLED THEM. AND MOM AND DAD SAID KILLIN' IS REAL BAD!
I BELIEVE THE HUMANS HAVE PHRASED IT RATHER SUCCINCTLY.
THE LORD GIVETH... AND THE LORD TAKETH AWAY.
HERE -- ALLOW ME TO SHOW YOU WHAT YOU HAVE DONE.


I'M SO SORRY, REED... I DON'T KNOW WHAT CAME OVER ME TODAY.
IT WAS AS IF... I DON'T KNOW...
ALL SORTS OF PROBLEMS JUST... LANDED ON ME ALL AT ONCE...
MOMMY! DADDY! IT'S... IT'S REALLY YOU!
YOU'RE HERE! SHE WAS RIGHT! SHE -- I MEAN, THEY --
IT'S ME! IT'S FRANKLIN!
MOM! DAD! THEY... THEY TOLD ME I GOTTA WIPE OUT A UNIVERSE... AND I DON'T KNOW WHICH ONE..!
TELL ME WHICH ONE I SHOULD GET RIDDA...
...AND PROMISE YOU WON'T BE MAD AT ME..?
TO BE CONTINUED!